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LEFT BY THE WAYSIDE

UK

Public hostility and official indifference are forcing many Gypsies and Travellers to live in third world conditions. David Batty reports

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Imagine you live on a foul-smelling, polluted wasteland with no electricity, no water and no sanitation.

You have no access to family healthcare. You live in constant fear of being forced to move home in the face of racism. This is the situation faced by those who belong to what the chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE), Trevor Phillips, recently described as "probably the single most intensely discriminated against" ethnic group in the UK - Gypsies and Travellers. A series of court battles between local authorities and Gypsies and Travellers has highlighted the terrible conditions in which Britain's 300,000 travelling people often live. Last week, the high court ruled that a group of Gypsies could stay

on a site they bought a year ago despite installing electricity cables, water pipes and septic tanks without planning permission from North Wiltshire district council. The judge, John Weeks QC, sitting at Bristol high court, said that to avoid suffering unnecessary hardship the 56 men, women and children could stay on the three-acre field in Minety, Wiltshire, until after a planning inquiry next February. Over the past decade the number of such illegal encampments on land privately owned by Gypsies has risen sharply. There were almost 2,000 last year - up 40% from 2003.

Campaigners for travelling people blame this increase, and the bitter legal wrangles they provoke, on the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act (1994), which removed the statutory duty on local councils to provide caravan sites. There are now just 324 local authority sites where under 6,000 caravans are pitched. It was intended that the 1994 act would lead to the creation of more private sites. But government research shows that 90% of planning applications made by travelling communities are refused, so few new encampments have been created. The result is more travelling people being forced to live in unsanitary, even dangerous, conditions on unauthorised sites, according to Sasha Barton, senior policy officer (gypsies and travellers) at the CRE. She said: "The 1994 act had a massive impact on the availability and reduction in public sites. It was expected that more private sites would be set up but this didn't happen. This led to more unauthorised encampments that in turn lead to evictions and planning enforcement disputes. "With no official address,

travelling people cannot start up treatment, and have no transferable healthcare records. While they do access hospital accident and emergency departments they don't get preventive healthcare such as childhood immunisation. Often they only get care once they reach crisis point."

The CRE is lobbying the government to amend the housing bill to reintroduce a statutory duty on councils to meet the accommodation needs of Gypsies and Travellers. The move is backed by the Local Government Association, which is concerned about the spiralling costs of litigation on small rural councils. Whatever the motivation, the move is backed by Luke Clements, director of the traveller law research unit at Cardiff University. He said: "All the legislation up to 1994 had been to integrate travellers and provide them with secure sites. Research shows that since the act there's been a significant decline in the number of sites and the condition they're in. "New sites have not been built and existing sites have fallen into disrepair, which has led to more precarious lifestyles with travelling people forced to move from place to place and camp on poor sites." Mr Clements, a solicitor and lecturer, said that due to public hostility and official indifference many official and unofficial sites are situated on roadsides, near sewage works or tips. "The most worrying aspect is the poor health of travelling children due to poor sanitation," he said. "Only around half of the sites have clean water and there's a lot where you can see raw sewage in puddles. I've come back from

sites with a sore throat for a week. They're effectively living in third world conditions. There's also a high accident rate among the children due to the poor conditions, especially those living next to busy roads." One Traveller, called Mike, told SocietyGuardian.co.uk that a local council had refused to let them use the septic tanks despite several children falling ill. He said: "When we had the septic tanks cleaned the council got an injunction to stop us using them. We have no proper showers. We've only got running water because one of the local people who lives nearby has let us attach a water meter to her supply." Margaret Greenfields, of the Thomas Coram research unit at the London Institute of Education, said that the "appalling" conditions on unofficial sites were exacerbated by poor access to healthcare. "Unofficial sites, particularly those on the roadside may not get a regular postal delivery if at all," she said. "With the added problem of poor adult literacy, missed appointments are common."

The travellers' rights campaigner said that she knew of cases where people had been turned away from GP surgeries either due to negative stereotypes about the travelling community or pressure from local authorities to deny them treatment. She said some councils fear that if Travellers register with a doctor it will be harder to move them on or to deny them planning permission. "High maternal death rates are a serious problem among travelling people," said Ms Greenfields. "But if you can't access a GP how can you access antenatal

screening?" The campaigner said that there were a few isolated examples of good practice, such as the National Association of Health Workers with Travellers and a dedicated health visitor service. But she said health and social care staff needed more training to improve the quality of care provided to travelling communities. "The main stereotype is you cannot work with them, they're going to be non-compliant," said Ms Greenfields. "There are high levels of ignorance and fear among care staff. A lot of it's based on fear. Social workers think they will get attacked by dogs. They're worried about large numbers of children wandering about, and think traveller people won't necessarily be honest about their situation. "I remember one case where a travelling family asked for help from the local council for their daughter who was disturbed and kept running away. The local authority wouldn't help them. They said: 'She's a traveller - of course she'll run away' Over the past four decades a series of small-scale studies has found that the health and life expectancy of travelling people may be substantially worse than that of the general population. Perhaps most worryingly, researchers have repeatedly identified extremely high levels of infant mortality and stillbirth. Next month, the Department of Health (DoH) is due to publish a report on the health of adult Gypsies and Travellers. The research, led by Professor Glenys Parry at the University of Sheffield, should provide the first comprehensive national picture of the community's health needs. Sasha Barton blames the current dearth of information on the failure of local officials to recognise